

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 01452 161559Z
ACTION NODS-00

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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7211

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 1452

NODIS

FOR ATHERTON

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR PPDC SY US
SUBJECT: PROPOSED PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE TO ASSAD

1. I SEE US DURING IMMEDIATE MONTHS AHEAD BASICALLY IN A HOLDING PATTERN TRYING TO MAINTAIN SYRO-US RELATIONS ON AN EVEN KEEL AS ACTION CONTINUES BETWEEN CAIRO AND JERUSALEM. AS PART OF THIS EFFORT, IT SEEMS TO ME AFTERMATH OF BEGIN VISIT WILL OFFER LOGICAL MOMENT FOR A PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATION GIVING OUR APPRAISAL OF WHERE THE PROCESS STANDS. ASSAD HAS BEEN TELLING ALL COMERS THAT HE VALUES HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH PRESIDENT AND THE SECRETARY AND THERE HAS BEEN NO APPROPRIATE OCCASION IN RECENT MONTHS FOR A PRESIDENTIAL EXCHANGE, OTHER THAN CARTER'S MESSAGE OF CONGRATULATIONS ON ASSAD'S REELECTION.

2. MESSAGE NEED NOT CONTAIN GREAT DETAIL BUT IT WOULD BE PARTICULARLY HELPFUL IF IT CONFIDED TO ASSAD SOMETHING ABOUT THE EFFORTS WE ARE MAKING TO MODIFY ISRAELI THINKING.

3. SYRIAN INTEREST IN MAINTAINING COMMUNICATION CONTINUES. YOU WILL RECALL THE UNEXPECTED OVERTURE FROM SHIHABI THE NIGHT SECRETARY VANCE LEFT DAMASCUS LAST DECEMBER
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(DAMASCUS 7712). SHIHABI NEVER FOLLOWED UP ON THIS MEETING NOR ANSWERED MY SUBSEQUENT REQUESTS TO SEE HIM. PERHAPS THIS IS SIMPLY BECAUSE HE HAS DEVELOPED NO IDEAS OF HIS OWN AS TO HOW WASHINGTON MIGHT ACT TO AVOID "PUSHING SYRIA BACK TOWARDS THE USSR." IN THE MEANTIME, A NUMBER OF SYRIAN SPOKESMEN HAVE SOUGHT TO MAKE THE POINT THAT ASSAD HAS PRESERVED HIS INDEPENDENCE OF ACTION VIS-A-VIS

BOTH THE ARAB REJECTIONISTS AND THE SOVIETS. (PRESIDENT HIMSELF MADE LATTER POINT FORCEFULLY TO JAMES RESTON IN MARCH 10 INTERVIEW.)

4. ON MARCH 12 I HEARD FROM MINECONOMY IMADI AN ECHO OF SHIHABI'S EARLIER PITCH. IMADI WAS UNWILLING TO REVEAL HIS SOURCE, BUT SAID HE HAD BEEN APPROACHED BY "ONE VERY CLOSE TO THE PRESIDENT" WHO WISHED THE MESSAGE TRANSMITTED TO ME THAT ASSAD FELT HE HAD OFFERED SYRIAN COOPERATION AND FRIENDSHIP TO THE UNITED STATES BUT THAT WASHINGTON HAD NOT RESPONDED (1). I AM NOT GETTING THIS MESSAGE DIRECTLY FROM KHADDAM OR ANY OTHER CONTACT.

5. THESE QUIET, INDIRECT MESSAGES FROM OUR SYRIAN CONTACTS CAN, I BELIEVE, BE READ AS SEEKING REASSURANCE THAT WE CONTINUE TO VALUE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH SYRIA. IN PUBLIC, ASSAD HAS DOWNPLAYED DIRECT CRITICISM OF US, AND MOST RECENTLY TOTALLY OMITTED MENTIONING THE UNITED STATES IN HIS MARCH 9 INAUGURAL SPEECH BEFORE THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL (DAMASCUS 1357). ALTHOUGH WE HAVE NO GROUNDS TO EXPECT A SHIFT IN SYRIAN POLICY VIS-A-VIS THE PEACE PROCESS IN THE NEAR FUTURE, I NONETHELESS BELIEVE RECOMMENDED PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE WOULD SERVE THE IMPORTANT PURPOSE OF KEEPING OPEN PRESIDENTIAL-LEVEL COMMUNICATION AND REASSURING ASSAD THAT WE ARE NOT WRITING HIM OFF.

MURPHY

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